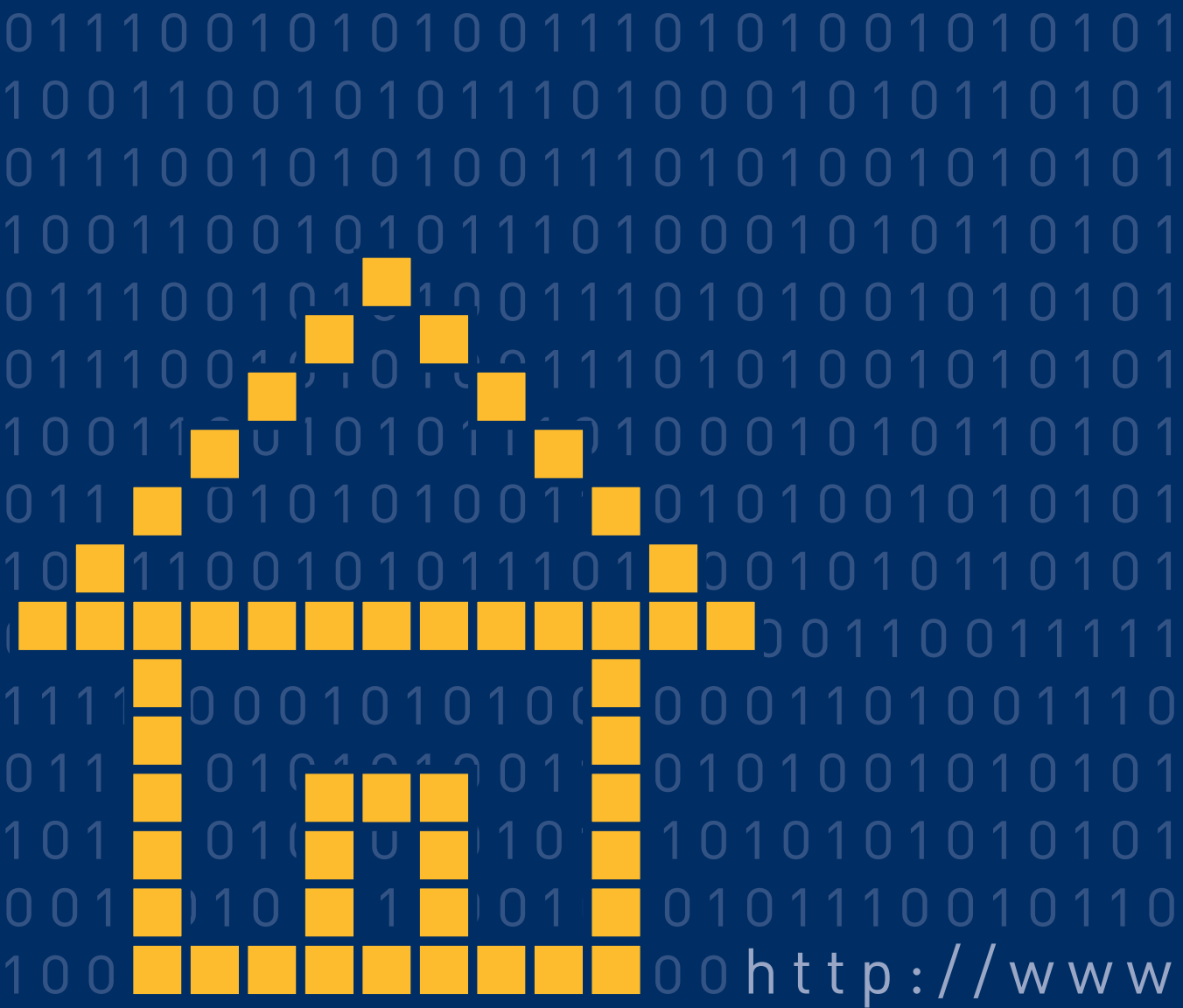
Social housing and digital exclusion

Other

DIGITAL EXCLUSION & SOCIAL HOUSING

NATIONAL HOUSING FEDERATION

business for neighbourhoods



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WELCOME

Foreword

This report is part of the Federation's futures publications series in which we explore and debate current and emerging trends in housing and related fields. We hope these publications will spark interest and debate in the wider housing sector and beyond and encourage innovative and creative responses to the challenges of today and tomorrow.

For many of us access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is an accepted part of everyday life. Nearly all working adults have access to the internet, and in many respects this represents freedom, freedom to access unimaginable amounts of information, services and opportunities.

But can you imagine life without access to ICT and the internet? This is the experience of many adults who lack the necessary resources, skills or confidence. As this report shows social housing tenants and residents demonstrate many of the characteristics associated with those who are most likely to be digitally excluded.

As the use of the internet and home computers become near universal, those without access to what are increasingly becoming necessities of modern life, feel the lack all the more keenly. Internet access is becoming even more important as increasingly access to the best deals for energy, banking and general household items become concentrated online.

And access to ICT, and the skills to use it, is rapidly becoming a new dividing marker between the haves and the have nots, creating and maintaining economic, social and labour market exclusion and potentially limiting participation in wider civil society.

This report explores the extent to which people miss out, from Facebook to Housing. But just as importantly it argues that there is a legitimate argument for housing associations to consider becoming involved in efforts to limit digital exclusion, just as they have increasingly taken on a wider neighbourhood role as part of their continuing commitment to fighting exclusion, poverty and disadvantage.

We argue strongly that whilst access to ICT is necessary to addressing digital exclusion it is not sufficient on its own. Skills and confidence remain major barriers that separate the digitally included from the digitally excluded. If we are to ensure that the digital landscape does not replicate the same patterns of disadvantage and exclusion that we are familiar with in our economic and social life we must match our efforts to increase access with work to give people the skills and confidence to maximise its benefits.

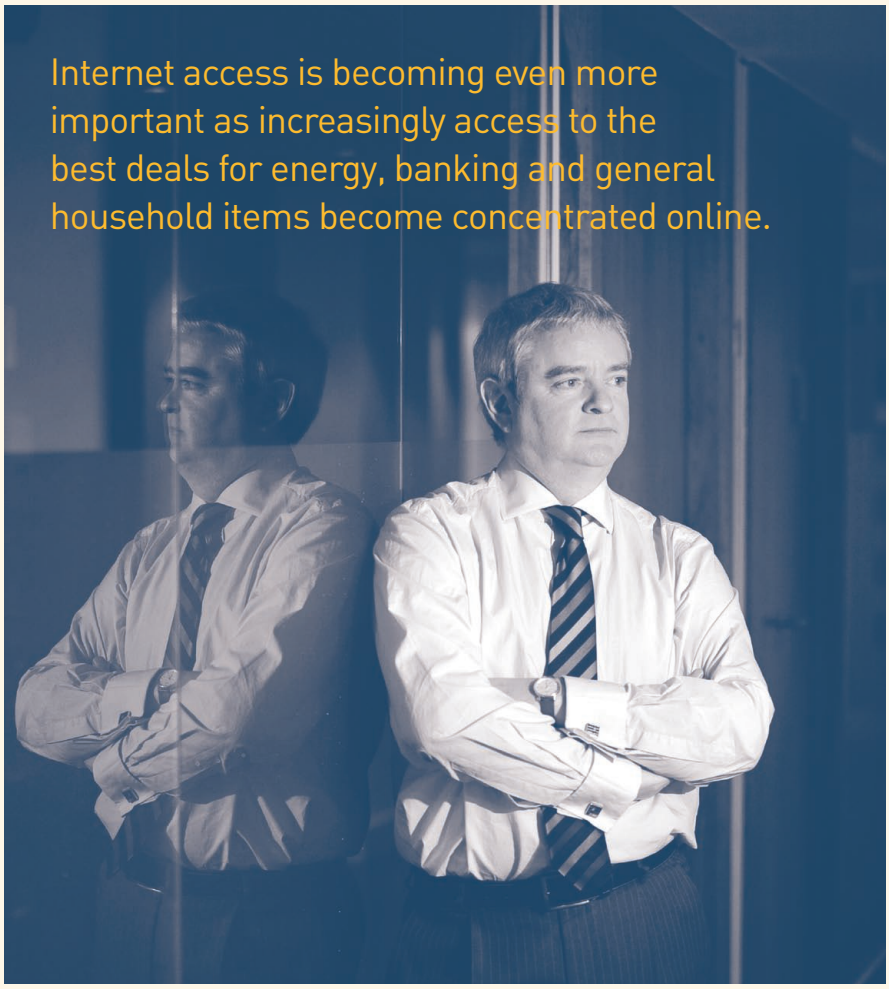


Image: David Orr, Chief Executive National Housing Federation

In this report we identify examples of effective and innovative approaches to dealing with digital exclusion. And we draw out the principles underlying these approaches that housing associations and other landlords can consider incorporating them into their own work addressing digital exclusion.

I hope this piece of research provides food for thought, and enables you to make the business case for providing services that enable your residents to become more digitally included, and see digital inclusion as increasingly becoming a core component of a good life.

DAVID ORR, Chief Executive
National Housing Federation

Introduction

It can hardly escape our attention that the contemporary world is based, to use Nicholas Negroponte's phrase, on 'Being Digital' (Negroponte, 1995). The 'knowledge economy', 'information society' and other similar terms alert us to the prevalence of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) in our daily lives. For many of us, ICT has become ubiquitous, and we can scarcely imagine our lives without it: we manage our bank accounts online, type reports on word processors, book our holidays, navigate our cars, email our friends and work colleagues, and so on. If we reflect on our use of such technologies, they are not simply an adjunct to our life but rather have seeped into its very fabric, and our everyday existence is structured on the assumption of the availability of ICT. Whether we like it or not, it has become a fact of existence for significant sections of the global population.

While this de facto inclusion has become part of the tempo of life, these resources are unevenly spread throughout society. Reports abound with talk and statistics of the 'haves' and the 'have nots', a 'digital divide' across the globe, within nations, within communities (Norris, 2001, Servon, 2002). The basic premise is that, if wellbeing in a society is based on access to these technologies, then those without this access, for whatever reasons, will suffer. Adverse effects include social exclusion, being closed off from the labour market, an inability to participate in civil society, lack of access to more efficient services or to cheaper products and so on. While some of the more hyperbolic commentators may overstate the impact of ICTs [1], the notion of the digital divide has drawn the attention of policy makers to address the problem. From the 'one laptop per child' project (www.laptop.org) to the UK government's recent 'Digital Challenge' initiative (www.digitalchallenge.gov.uk) and its limited (and somewhat unsuccessful) experimentation with the provision of computers to low income groups ('Computers within Reach'), the policy agenda has increasingly exhibited a digital slant. Indeed with the recent publication of the Digital Britain Interim Report by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform (hereafter DCMS/BERR), the digital agenda has moved towards centre stage.

This report will make the case for the engagement of the providers of social housing in tackling the issues raised by the asymmetrical distribution of ICT resources, which we shall term 'digital exclusion' [2]. The conditions causing digital exclusion and its methods of treatment have a close affinity with the broader principles of housing associations: housing associations have the potential to develop strategic interventions addressing digital exclusion, in what would be an appropriate response to the Hills report on the future role of social housing in England (Hills, 2007).

The report is structured in five sections. The first offers an insight into issues underpinning the digital exclusion, both conceptual, 'what is digital exclusion?' and empirical, 'what is its extent?' The second highlights the affinity of digital exclusion with the broader, normative, social welfare agenda of the social housing sector. The third raises key issues that might constitute a critical and appropriate response to tackling digital exclusion. The fourth identifies a series of existing interventions in the digital exclusion agenda. The final section identifies key policy points.

The issues raised by digital exclusion are complex and multi-dimensional, and that adequate responses from the social housing sector must go beyond simple technological solutions. Instead, they should embody innovative interventions that recognise the broader agenda of social exclusion, of which digital exclusion, in key ways, is simply one aspect.

> ...housing associations have the potential to develop strategic interventions addressing digital exclusion...

1 http://www.welchco.com/02/14/01/60/99/10/0102.HTM
- Peter Drucker,– http://www.dti.gov.uk/ministers/archived/alexander141101.html

2 As we will discuss in the following section, we prefer the term 'digital exclusion'. However, digital divide and digital exclusion can be treated as synonymous in this report.

SECTION 1

Digital Exclusion: Extent and Effects

The extent

Early debates on the digital divide are phrased in terms of the access to and use of ICT, in particular access to the internet (in May, ed, 2003: 143). Such analyses point towards the existence of a divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. It is argued that those without access are excluded from participation in aspects of society, such as access to information, services, goods, or participation in any activity that has a fundamental digital element. In order to assess the extent of this divide, various researchers have used figures concerning access, in particular access to the internet, as a proxy indicator for each side of the divide. While these definitions have been subjected to substantial critique and refinement, they have the advantage of both framing the initial terms of debate and offering quantitative analyses of the uptake and access of ICT, thus giving insight into the empirical extent of these issues.

Information and figures on internet usage in the UK are restricted to the regular survey carried out by the Oxford Internet Institute (OxIS). The following summarises key points from the last three surveys (2003, 2005 and 2007).

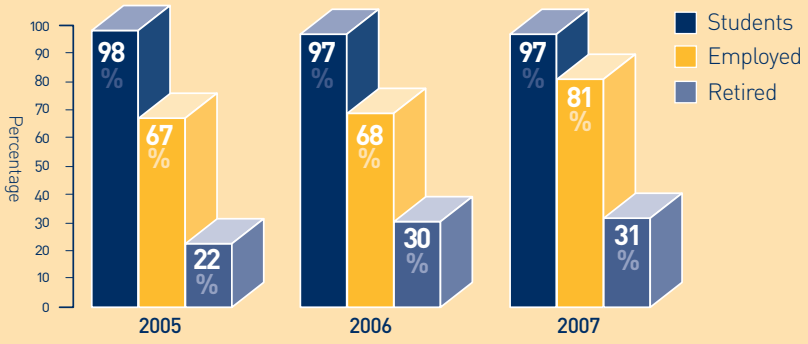
Characteristics of those who do / do not have access to the internet

The 2007 OxIS report states that "Men, students, higher educated and higher income individuals are all more likely to use the internet than women, retired, disabled, lower educated and lower income individuals" (Dutton and Helsper, 2007). In relation to their earlier surveys of 2003 and 2005, gender, age, income and ability gaps remain mostly constant.

FIGURE 1

Use by 'Lifestage'

Looking at lifestage (where participants are asked to choose their best current description from students, employed or retired [3]) employed people at 81% (up from 68% in 2005) have closed the gap to the almost universal student usage (97%), whereas the number of retired people using the internet has remained stable between 2005 and 2007 at around 30% (figure 1).



Use by income

Income plays a significant role in terms of access, with higher income groups reporting higher rates of internet usage; those in the highest income category are more than twice as likely (91%) to use the internet than those in the lowest income category (39%). Notably, all income groups increased usage between 2005 and 2007 (figure 2).

FIGURE 2

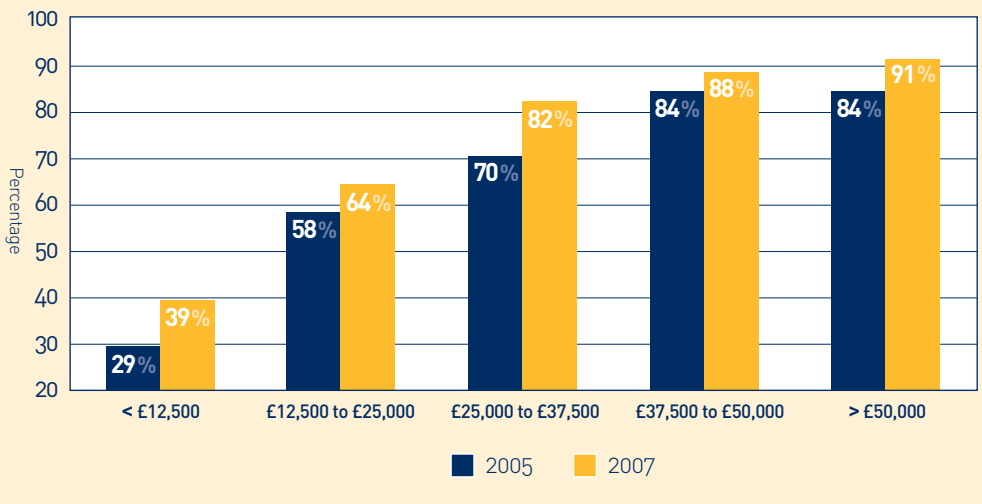
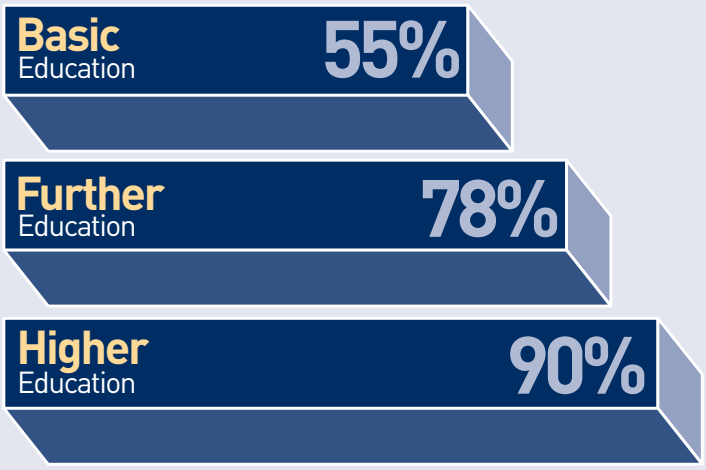


FIGURE 3

Use by education (2007)

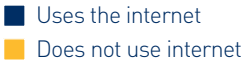
Education shows a similar impact, with only 55% of those with basic education using the internet compared to 90% with a higher education (figure 3).



Other apparent differences include gender; with women reporting slightly lower rates of usage than men (although this difference has decreased from 9% in 2003 to 5% in 2005 and 2007). Additionally, people who state they have health problems, or disabilities limiting the kind or amount of work they can do, are half as likely to use the internet as others (figure 4).

Use of the internet seems most strongly influenced by income, education and 'lifestage'. However, it is worth emphasizing that the divide across these indicators is not absolute, but a question of degree. There is still a stock of users in low income, basic education and retired groups.

FIGURE 4



Disability and internet use

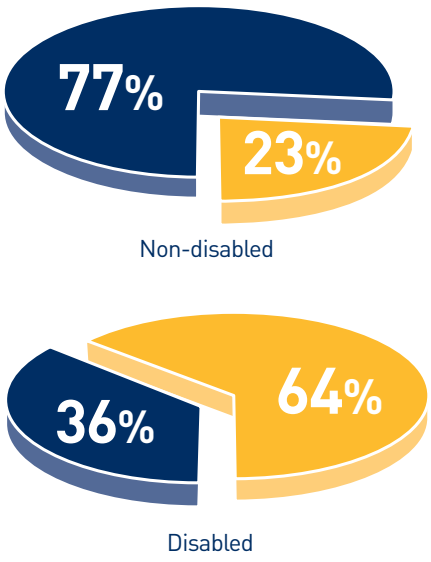
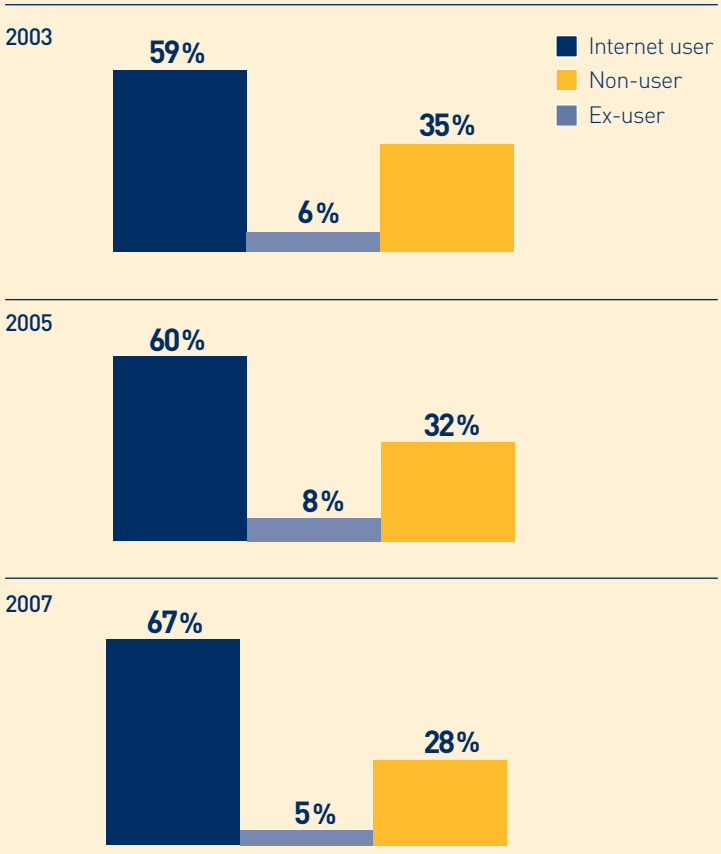


FIGURE 5

Type of user

The OxIS reports divide those without access into ex-users and non-users. The ex-users have, from 2003 to 2007, remained roughly the same at about 5-8% of the population. The percentage of non-users has decreased from 35% in 2003 to 28% in 2007, still a considerable proportion (figure 5).



3 The survey asks individuals to self-select their 'lifestage' from these three categories, it does not include the category of 'unemployed'.

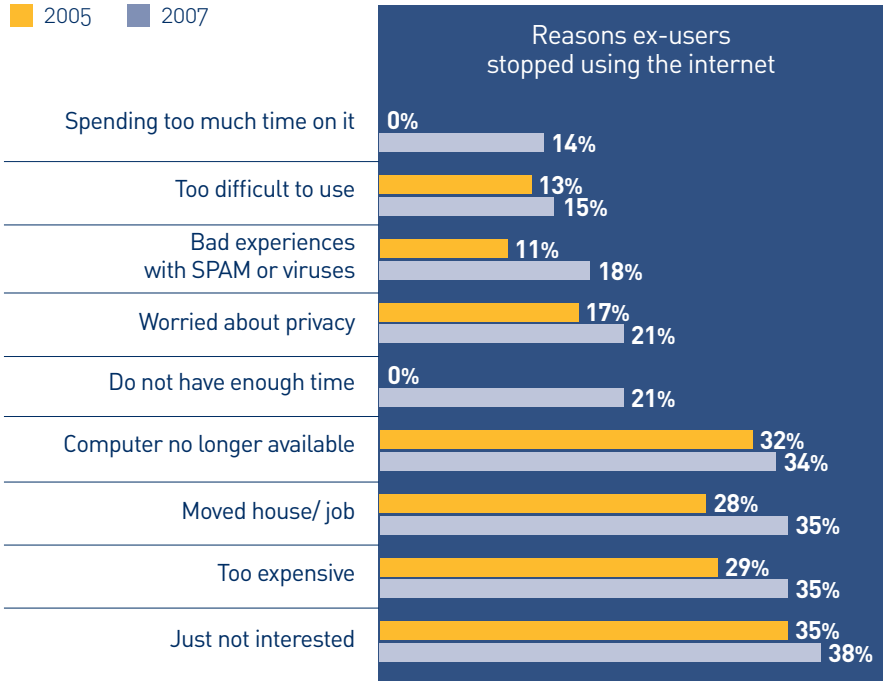
The reasons why people do not use the internet

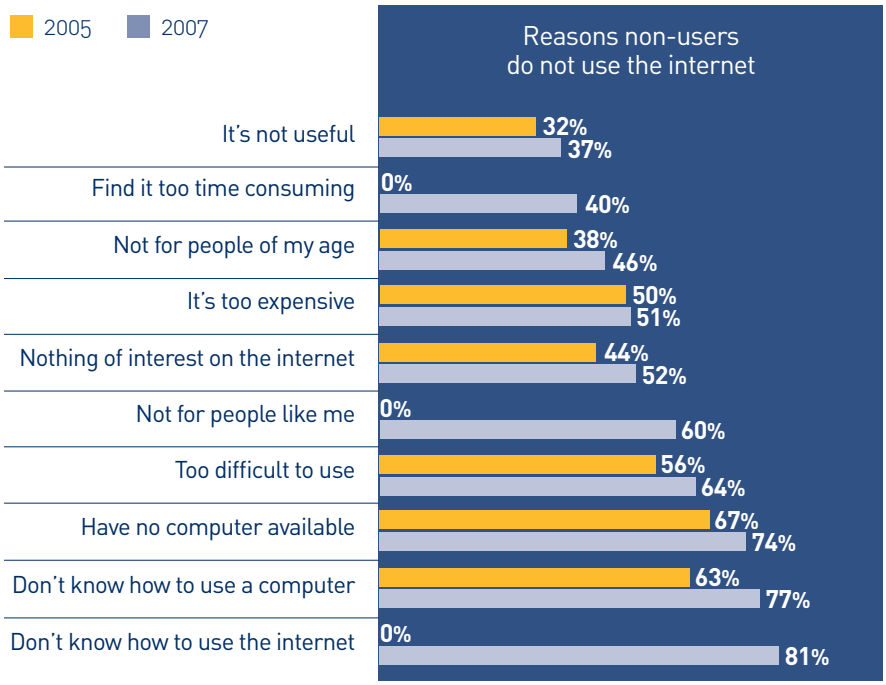
The reasons non-users and ex-users give, although overlapping in concerns about high costs and loss of access, vary in priority (figures 6 and 7).

The ex-users state lack of interest or perceived usefulness more frequently, whereas a lack of skills is a more important concern for non-users. The report suggests that ex-users, who are more likely to have access to skilled 'proxy-users', make an informed choice about their usage, but fear or lack of knowledge stalls non-users from this same choice.

Of the non-users, different social groups have varying reasons for not using the internet. Retired non-users are more likely than other lifestage groups to report that the internet is not for people their age, that it is not useful or interesting. Unemployed non-users are the most likely to indicate cost. This suggests that different strategies tailored to particular social circumstances could have significant value in increasing usage.

FIGURE 6 & 7





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Evidence for a digital divide

The report belatedly sees the increase in internet use from 2003 to 2007 as slow, if not reaching a plateau. There is evidence for a digital divide in the persistent third of households that do not access the internet. The number that say they plan to gain access in the next year has dropped dramatically – 18% in 2007 compared to 44% in 2005. This would indicate an increase in household access of 5% or less in 2008. For 2007, three-quarters of non-users say they will definitely not connect, whilst only a fifth of ex-users agree. The likelihood of non-users connecting is also decreasing – 16% in 2005 said they probably or definitely would gain access, a mere 10% in 2007 (figure 8).

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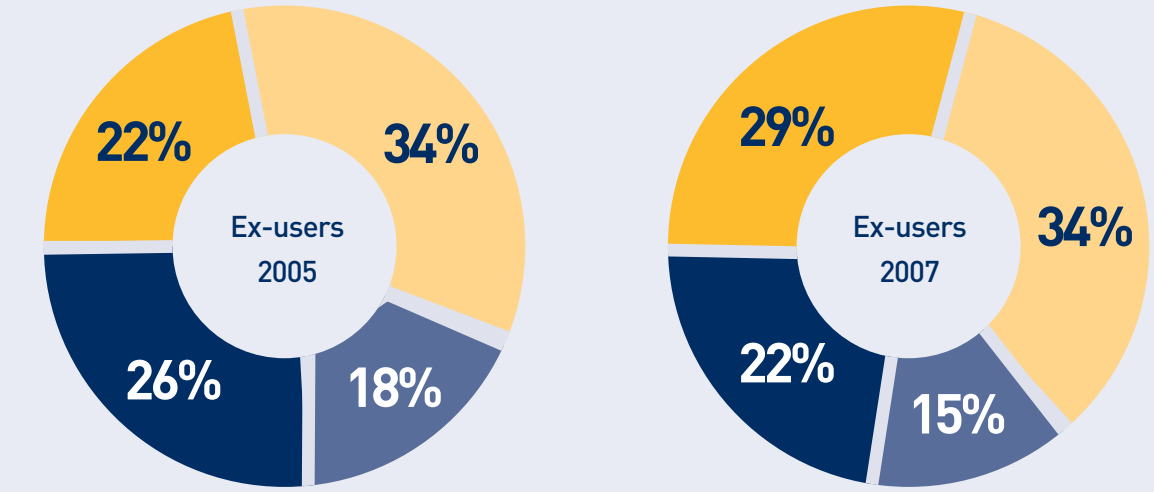
FIGURE 8

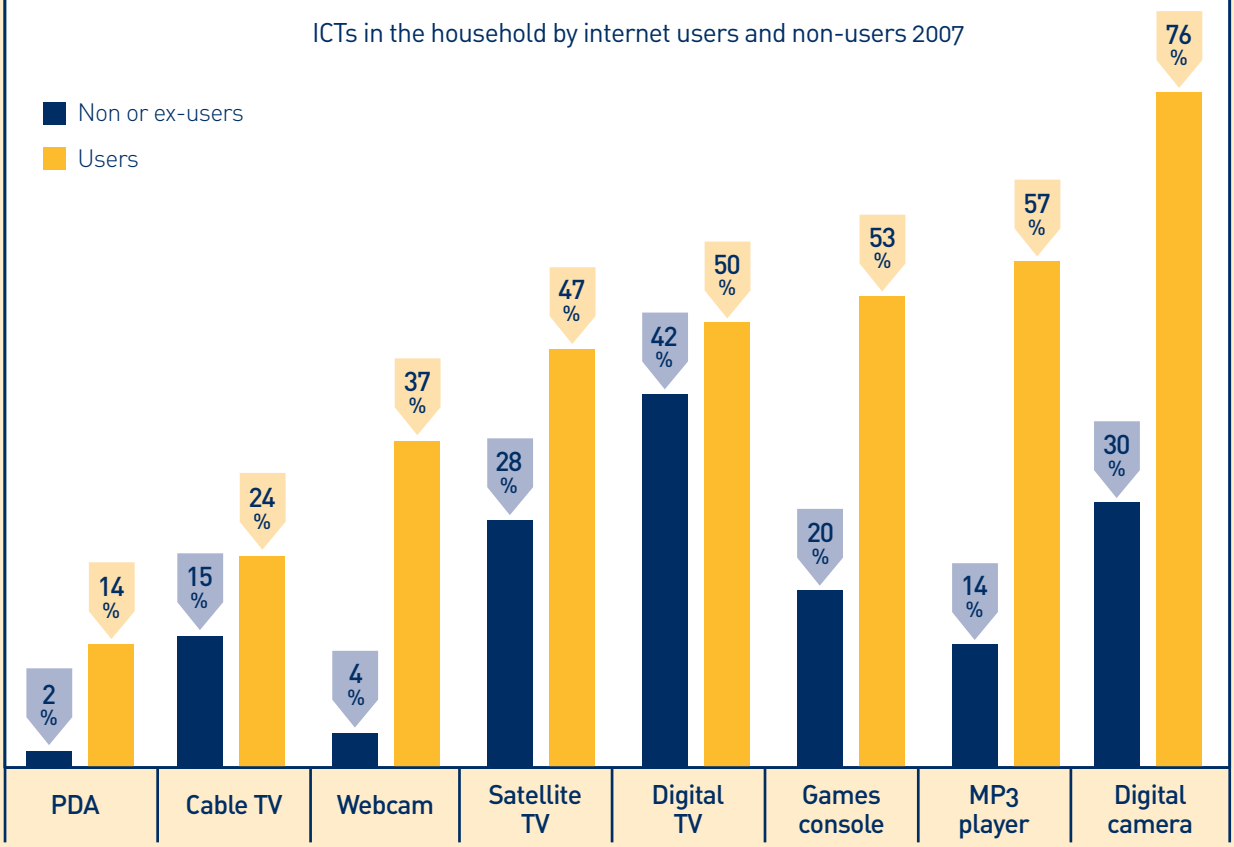


The report notes that "the use of computers is essentially equivalent to the use of the internet, reflecting the continuing importance of personal computers in the household to the diffusion of the internet." 89% of non- and ex-internet users do not use a computer. Internet users (and therefore most probably personal computer owners) are more likely to have other ICTs in their household than non-users: for example, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), games consoles and digital cameras (figure 9).

Those without the internet are more likely to be television-oriented, having digital (42%) or satellite (28%) television. If these non-users are concerned about the required skills, access and cost of personal computers, there is perhaps some hope in the potential for future access through other ICTs such as more affordable and functional mobile phones, or (more likely) digital and satellite television.

While access figures offer a simple understanding of the influences and preferences of certain groupings outside of the information society, it is a somewhat crude measure of the experience of being excluded.

FIGURE 9



4 In this respect, the study of community informatics is particularly aware of this issue.

While access figures offer a simple understanding of the influences and preferences of certain groupings outside of the information society, it is a somewhat crude measure of the experience of being excluded. It could therefore lead to rather simplistic approaches to policy, such as identifying digital exclusion solely with the question of access (Warschauer, 2003; Kling, 2002). More subtle analyses suggest that, in summary:

a. digital exclusion is multi-dimensional; it is more complex than simply access to ICT

b. we should understand digital exclusion in terms of its relation to other forms of social exclusion

c. understanding digital exclusion means being aware of the impact of technology in a social context and within society as a whole

Digital exclusion is multi-dimensional

Recent approaches to the digital divide (Mossberger et al, 2003, Servon, 2002) argue that the digital divide is composed of multiple dimensions. The types, aspects and extent of the divide vary (Table 1), but simple technological solutions (ie providing the missing technology will not necessarily bridge the divide. However, although digital exclusion is not always (or only) caused by lack of access to hardware, this does not discount the difficulty in solving access problems. Access to hardware is necessary to tackle digital exclusion – but will not solve the problem on its own. Current research suggests that home access is the key factor – it allows access at all times of the day and enables experimentation with the technology (Anderson, 2006). Provision at public access points (examples include a Community Technology Centre) is not an alternative to home provision but may be a useful adjunct to it, particularly as a place to receive training and encourage face-to-face interaction in the context of technology.

In particular, the skills agenda seems crucial; those without IT skills (noted by Mossberger et al as those without access) are unlikely to be able to use ICT effectively without some form of skills development. Similarly the question of content is crucial. Servon (2002) argues that the content and culture of ICT is shaped by first movers whose particular characteristics may produce a particular culture and content ill-suited to those not sharing the same characteristics. Perceptions of the usefulness of ICT, particularly in relation to economic opportunity, are fundamental. Mossberger et al (2003) suggest that those who are excluded underestimate the value and usefulness of ICT in the broader labour market. Underlying this class of issues is the concept of usefulness. If individuals are rational consumers of ICT, then they will use it if, and only if, it gives them something of value. Of course, they may not know how potentially useful ICT is, or have a distorted idea of the resources available. However, it is worth emphasizing that individuals make use of ICT if they perceive it to be useful. In the same way that word-processors and spreadsheets led to increasing PC usage in business and in the home, those being offered access need to find the access valuable: we shall return to this issue in later sections.

Any intervention into the digital divide has to take these issues into account and, more importantly, provide good reasons for why the divide should be bridged; reasons that are more concrete than just referring to the information society or the virtual society.

Mossberger et al.	Servon	Warschauer
• Access • Skills • Economic opportunity • Democratic	• Access • IT literacy / training • Context	• Access • Education • Culture • Power

Digital and social exclusion

The evidence concerning access shows that groups frequently referred to as socially excluded are also digitally excluded. The concept of social exclusion has a long history, though the term 'social exclusion' became more widely used in the 1980s. In brief, social exclusion refers to the different ways in which some groups are persistently prevented from participating fully in society (examples are given in Table 2).

Typical characteristics	Typical exclusions
Low income Low education Low social mobility	Civil society Labour market Learning opportunities

The key point about social exclusion is that its multiple dimensions make simple interventions ineffective. Social exclusion is pernicious because it is both multi-dimensional and persistent. The digital divide is not separate from the broader context of social exclusion, but is part of it – with the potential to magnify and entrench it still further. In other words, digital exclusion is not simply technological exclusion, but is part of a broader agenda of social exclusion, and needs to be tackled as such. The term 'digital exclusion' is preferable to 'digital divide' because it links to broader issues of social exclusion.

Digital exclusion in a social context

Perhaps, more radically, we can begin to see that digital exclusion is not only both multi-dimensional and inextricably linked with social exclusion, but also should be thought of in terms of the link between technology and its social context. As Raymond Williams stated, "A technology is always, in a full sense, social" (Williams, 1981: 227). While this typically pithy comment raises many complex questions concerning the emergence and application of technology within a society, we can take this approach as recognising "the social embeddedness of technology"(Deibert, 1997). In other words, while digital divide suggests that technology "impacts" in fact technology and society are co-constitutive. While technology can help shape social relations, social relations also shape how technology is developed and deployed' (Warschauer, 2003: 301).

Any attempt to address digital exclusion must recognise the social context with which it overlaps: the context shapes the use of the technology and vice versa [4]. If technology and the social context are mutually supportive, then any strategy to address exclusion needs to recognise the importance of social context. Technological intervention is itself a social intervention that affects the use of technology in a social setting.

The effects

So far we have discussed the extent of digital exclusion and how to describe it adequately. However, it is necessary to talk briefly about its effects. While the literature is full of generalities and assumptions that digital exclusion is problematic, it tends not to offer specific examples. In this section we will identify some of the key effects of this exclusion.

Access to labour markets

Access to labour markets often considered fundamental to the move from exclusion to inclusion; labour is not only tied with income and the ability to satisfy a wider variety of needs and desires, but is also linked to issues of psychological well-being and feelings of self-worth. Those without ICT access suffer from problems in relation to the labour market in a number of ways; we highlight two of them.

i. The labour market demands ICT skills. They are not only relevant to ICT-specific jobs but are increasingly required in a majority of jobs (some cite as many as 90% of new jobs require ICT skills [5]). Those without basic ICT skills either suffer a severe disadvantage or are, in essence, excluded from large segments of the labour market.

ii. Opportunities in the labour market increasingly require access to ICT: more and more jobs are advertised partly or solely online; employers are increasingly using virtual recruitment, eg Monster.co.uk, fish4jobs, with these sites increasing their coverage of the job market. The application process frequently involves an online application or completing and emailing a word-processor template to a prospective employer. Thus, not only does the labour market demand ICT skills, it increasingly requires ICT access. For example, the current policy of Sainsbury's is only to accept online applications for positions in its stores [6]

Access to services

Discussions of the information society frequently talk about the increasing online provision of goods and services. For some time, many businesses have offered goods and services both online and offline, and there has been growing emphasis on online provision, with some providers offer financial incentives for customers using online services. Moreover, an increasing number of businesses only deliver services online, for example:

- online banking
- online shopping (eg Amazon, Tesco direct, Play.com)
- information search (eg Yell, Google)
- information on government services (eg e-gov gateway, local government websites, direct.gov)
- bus timetables, rail fares (eg nationalrail.co.uk, nationalexpress.com)

Online delivery enables access in a supposedly more efficient manner that is available on-demand at any time of the day. Innovative services may also make use of technology for which there is no offline equivalent:

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for example price comparison websites (eg moneysupermarket.com, Kelkoo, Dealtime). With the increased closure of community-based services (perhaps the closure of post offices is most apparent), those who are digitally excluded do not readily have an alternate mode of provision. This lack of access can also be extended to educational services and skills development.

Indeed, the Open University, the largest supplier of university level distance learning in the UK, requires access to a computer to submit assessments and engage in online discussion, and is moving towards delivering an increasing proportion of its courses on-line.

Participation

This section covers, in broad terms, the question of active participation within

a social group such as a community (physically co-located or otherwise), civil society, or a neighbourhood. This perhaps is one of the most pressing issues of the day, where ICT enables people to take part in social interaction. So instead of access to ICT being about people passively receiving information, active engagement with ICT allows someone to create their own presence on the internet, interacting and participating as an engaged user. The term 'Web 2.0' [7] , is often used, referring broadly to social networking sites (eg Facebook, MySpace), community development of resources, and new forms of engagement with civil society. Supporters of this view can sometimes overstate the impact of these technologies compared with existing forms of participation. However, there is potential for Web 2.0 participation to become increasingly important and thus entrench and extend digital exclusion, which in turn has the potential for increased social exclusion, often reinforcing pre-existing divides. Web 2.0 style technologies could also extend (and change) exclusion in terms of participation in key areas of civil life.

So instead of access to ICT being about people passively receiving information, active engagement with ICT allows someone to create their own presence on the internet, interacting and participating as an engaged user.

5 E-skills UK http://www.e-skills.com/Research-and-policy/itinsights/1055

6 Sainsbury's website, www.sainsburys.co.uk/aboutus/recruitment/careers_new.htm [accessed: Feb 2009]

7 This term, though it receives great attention in the media, is not so widely accepted within the academic context – although the distinction between passive and active is.

SUMMARY

This section has argued that:

- there is evidence of different levels of access to the internet in both the US and UK
- lower education and lower income are positively correlated with lower access
- digital exclusion is a more complex phenomenon than simply lacking access to the internet. Three key aspects are:
  - it includes issues of skills, perceptions and perceived utility
  - it is linked with the broader issues of social exclusion
  - any attempt to resolve digital exclusion is itself a social intervention, and must take into account the role of social influences in the use and deployment of ICT
- digital exclusion can have a wide-ranging effect in a number of areas. Taken together these exclusions could signal profound disengagement with contemporary society. The key elements are:
  - problems of access to labour markets, in terms of the demand for ICT skills in the labour market, and of the ICT skills required to find and apply for jobs
  - problems of access to a wide range of services, some of which have no direct offline equivalent, and the increasing substitution of the online for physically accessible services
  - participation, in particular the increasingly active use of the Web to engage with communities and social groups

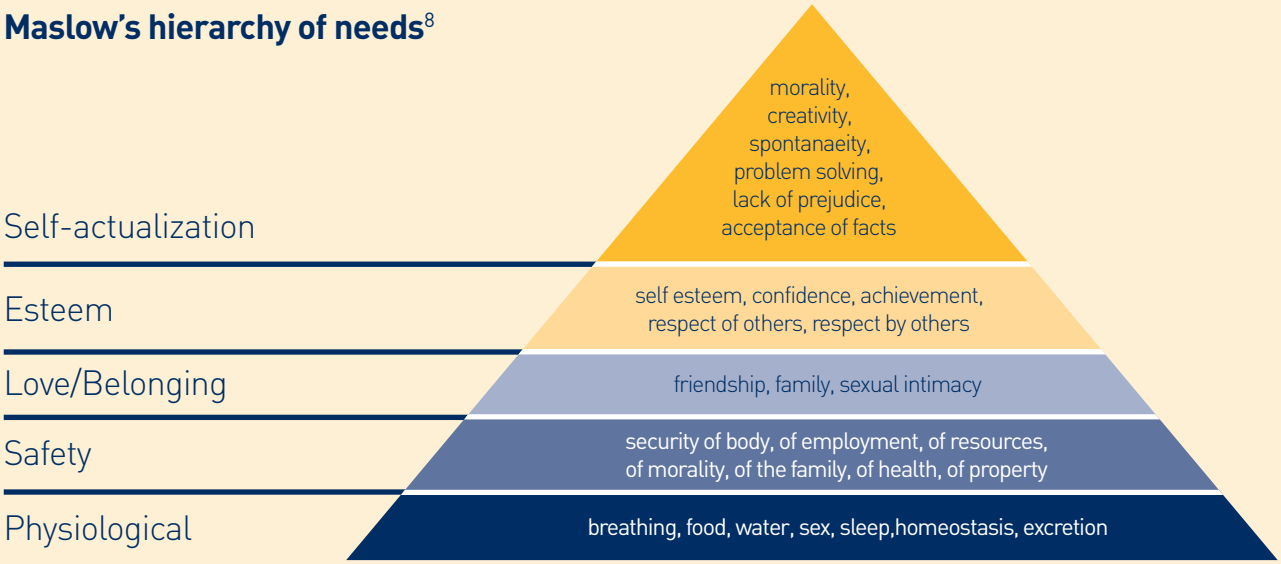
...any attempt to resolve digital exclusion is itself a social intervention, and must take into account the role of social influences in the use and deployment of ICT...

SECTION 2

Why Housing Associations?

Having discussed the extent of digital exclusion, its content and its consequences, it is necessary to ask why housing associations should (a) be concerned with these questions and (b) get involved with tackling them. The answer to both is, we claim, to be found by looking at current policy drivers and at the principles underlying the social housing sector. Addressing digital exclusion in a strategic manner involves questioning the founding principles, and intervention in the pressing demands of the day.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs[8]



The first response to these questions is perhaps the most obvious, and the least conclusive. As the influential Hills report on the Future Roles of Social Housing in England says, those in the social housing sector have comparatively lower rates of employment, lower income, higher rates of long-term unemployment and lower social mobility than those outside of the social housing system. Not only are the tenants (on standard income measures of deprivation) substantially more deprived, but some are also perniciously so. A notable percentage of those in the social housing sector are persistently poor and lack substantial social mobility.

The existence of these factors leads us to conclude that those within this group have a higher likelihood of being digitally excluded. Indeed, socially and digitally excluded people show the same characteristics because, arguably, they are (at least in the UK) the same people. Understanding digital exclusion as part of a broader pattern of social exclusion emphasises this point and reinforces the view that digital exclusion is, in many ways, an aspect of social exclusion. Put simply, housing associations have access to a population that is very likely to be digitally excluded, so there is an opportunity for them to intervene strategically in this issue. Not only is there a digitally-excluded population, but the evidence suggests that such a successful intervention will involve access within the home.

There has to be a compelling reason for housing associations to formulate a strategy to combat digital exclusion as part of their additional neighbourhood services. Our argument is that digital exclusion is part of the foundations that underpin the social housing sector and it offers the chance to tackle future issues as identified in the Hills report.

The idea behind social housing is that it meets needs that are not met through other means – often because of market failure. Social housing provides tenancies which the market does not deliver in adequate numbers, quality and/or cost. The underlying principle, as expressed by Hills, is the aim of providing "a decent home for all at a price within their means" (Hills, 2007: 204). This statement assumes that this is a basic right for individuals within our society. Talking about 'rights' leads to complex questions that we shall not dwell on here. However, what is important is that basic human needs are often expressed as the underpinning of this right. According to Maslow's influential hierarchy of needs (figure 10), provision of housing is at the bottom of the hierarchy as a basic human need, one up from the need to sustain life. Those needs at the bottom of the hierarchy are the most pressing: they represent the basic requirements for continuing existence.

The language of rights emphasises these needs as basic human rights, claiming that everyone has the right to the satisfaction

of some, or all, of them. Housing associations operate at the bottom end of the hierarchy, but their first principle involves the provision of rights throughout the hierarchy. This broader, social welfare function recognises the need to intervene in the market to provide housing, but it can also include a broader role, in tackling social inclusion and the broader rights of the individual. On this basis, what underpins social housing is not market intervention but specific fulfilment of a perceived right in the context of a social welfare agenda. Since delivering housing is a principle, a primary right, and a substantial and continuing practical issue, the question of social housing could be reduced to issues of bricks and mortar rather than part of an expanded social welfare agenda.

While these rights-based arguments can seem rather abstract, they engage with one of the core concerns of the Hills report, which focuses on the existing tenant population. Suggesting a link between housing provision and social inclusion, Hills for example notes that some housing issues may be labour-market issues (Hills, 2007: 191). While this dichotomous approach might be limiting, it does at least point towards a broader policy based on the concept of social inclusion. Similarly, the lack of social mobility enables us to reflect on the relationship between social housing and its social consequences. One practical way of thinking about the relationship between the provision of housing, the satisfaction of basic needs and the provision of rights is in the question of 'persistence'.

Table 3. First and second order resources (Second order, 2002: 19-20)

First order	Servon
Food	Post-secondary education
Clothing	Economic literacy
Shelter	Information technology
Housing	Ability to accumulate assets
Primary & secondary education	Soft skills
Healthcare	
Childcare	

In her analysis of the digital divide, Lisa J. Servon uses the model of first and second order resources (see Table 3). The former refers to those resources "necessary for day-to-day existence"; the latter "have to do with people's ability to accumulate assets, broadly defined, that help them to exit poverty and remain out of poverty" (Servon, 2002: 19). In essence, first order interventions are required for continuing existence while second order interventions, if successful, reduce the persistent need for first order interventions. Interventions that are only targeted at the first order cannot address persistent reliance on social provision and cannot produce social mobility. Information technology is a second order resource, one of those – among others - that can engage with the problem of persistent social immobility following the provision of first order resources. So if housing associations are to treat Hills' challenge effectively and develop a focus on existing tenants, they need to develop a strategic response to the provision of second order resources.

8 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs.svg

SUMMARY

As we outlined in the previous section, persistent digital exclusion produces a series of issues based around access to markets, access to services and participation. These issues can contribute to and intensify persistent social immobility. Intervening in these issues involves housing associations in addressing the broader welfare role that underpins rights-based intervention in the housing market.

This section has argued that:

- housing associations have the chance to intervene in digital exclusion because:
  - existing tenants tend to be digitally excluded
  - intervention will, to a certain degree, involve provision within the home
- an intervention in digital exclusion is in line with the broader social welfare role of housing associations, which is based on rights
- housing associations' current focus may, understandably, be more on the provision of housing rather than this broader focus
- an intervention in digital exclusion has the potential to tackle the issue of persistent lack of social mobility
- addressing the digital exclusion agenda is a strategic response to the Hills report's recommendation to focus on existing tenants.

Having stated the case for housing associations taking part in interventions involving digital exclusion, we shall now move on to look at some of the parameters and qualities that these interventions may take.

SECTION 3

Tackling Digital Exclusion

We have so far claimed that digital exclusion is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon that operates at the core of the social welfare/social inclusion agenda, underpinning the housing association's intervention into the social world. While it is clear that a divide exists between those who have ready access to a variety of ICTs and those who do not, we have not discussed the practicalities of tackling this issue, and in particular the challenges for housing associations should they take up this agenda. In this section we will consider some of the key features of interventions and some of the myths with which they are entwined. Section four offers a brief series of vignettes looking at current and innovative technological practices relating to these issues.

9 Although limited to a recognition of the issue, the Digital Britain Interim Report makes reference to the need for a digital skills development agenda.

There are a few comments to bear in mind concerning this section. Firstly, we do not believe that tackling digital exclusion is a 'silver bullet' that will solve the problem of social exclusion; lack of ICT resources are one problem of many that contribute to the complex phenomenon of social exclusion. However, digital exclusion is becoming increasingly important in the existence and prevalence of persistent social exclusion. Secondly, we cannot offer simple solutions to the problem of digital exclusion. Since both interventions and technology overlap within social life, simple prescriptions are likely to be unhelpful, or even misleading. This section is best understood as 'handles for reflective practice' (Huxham and Vangen, 2005), recognising that housing associations and their tenants have the knowledge to form a sophisticated and appropriate response to digital exclusion within their particular context.

The hardware

It is an obvious point to make, but the provision of hardware and broadband access at an affordable cost is a necessary condition for tackling digital exclusion – a point emphasised in the Digital Britain Interim Report with its target of universal access to broadband by 2012 (DCMS/BERR, 2009:12). However, this point raises a couple of questions: about the form of the provision – at home, in a community setting, as a series of loaned machines – and about the extent to which housing associations should subsidise this provision. Frequently, provision relies on resources and a response develops against the backdrop of resource availability and existing strategic priorities. Issues of hardware need to be treated in parallel with issues of access. Installation of broadband within a home setting can be expensive and monthly costs could become prohibitive. Various organisations, including housing associations, have attempted to deal with these issues by adopting a delivery model to its community at a reduced cost (eg London Fields solutions and community-based wi-fi networks). Earlier discussion of digital exclusion talked about the provision of hardware (eg the $100 laptop, the UK government's limited experiment with subsidised provision). However, a word of caution is needed. While the provision of technology is a necessary condition for tackling digital exclusion, it is not sufficient on its own. As we have emphasised throughout this report, digital exclusion is a multi-faceted phenomenon, the response to which must recognise and be appropriate to the issue it is trying to address. The following offers a number of themes that form the backdrop to an adequate intervention.

Skills

Following previous research on digital exclusion, there is an apparent skills deficit within those excluded from participation with ICT. Not only are they likely to lack confidence and basic skills, they are more likely to have negative feelings about ICT, and may also think that the technology lacks value to their lives. So, in a worst possible case, an intervention could be suffused with dislike, imputed irrelevance and a lack of confidence. Interventions into digital exclusion by housing associations need to tackle this skills / confidence / perceptions agenda. ICT needs to be introduced within an integrated system of training delivery. Of course, parts of the skills development can take place in the context of ICT itself. However, potential diffidence is only likely to be overcome in the context of face-to-face learning in a supportive environment; there may well be access to expertise within the housing association community itself that may be used as a resource. Clearly, this training adds to the resource

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cost. However, delivering a skills agenda within the context of hardware delivery should lessen the chance of beige boxes gathering dust in the corner of rooms. Skills development is vital to develop the competencies needed to extract value from the hardware and the confidence to explore and experiment with its potential uses .

Utility

It has long been claimed that the take-up of particular pieces of technology is linked with its utility (both perceived and actual). If a piece of ICT and/or its applications does something more efficiently, enables activity with greater ease, allows new forms of action/interaction or brings down the cost of some previously prohibitively expensive activity, then it becomes desirable and can end up in general usage. To adopt a piece of jargon, these are referred to as 'killer applications' or 'killer apps' - applications/technologies which convince people to purchase a technology and use it. Examples frequently quoted are spreadsheets for businesses to calculate their accounts and manage stock, word-processing software which replaced the manual typewriter, email enabling simple, quick and effective communication between individuals, and browsers for simple surfing of the web. These are the kinds of things people want when they interact with technology and for which they are willing, initially, to pay substantial amounts. While it may seem obvious for people to become involved with ICT, they have to see that it has real value for them.

A potential problem with digital exclusion is that ICT is often prone to first mover advantage and development, ie those who enter into a new realm first shape and develop it to their needs. Hence tools/applications suited to those at the initial phase of the development may not match the needs (cultural, financial etc) of new groups of users. For example, the ability to conduct share dealing on-line at low cost and have a RSS feed of your current portfolio is unlikely to be useful to someone with limited income who is more concerned with the provision of basic needs.

Of course a 'killer app' for an individual may be linked to skills development: gaining proficiency in Office software will give the skills needed to apply for a job that demands such skills. However, some consideration needs to be given to the demands of the community in which the intervention is made. Once the issues of skills, confidence and perception are matched with a desired application then the potential for both use and creative application of the technology could be enabled. This could be as basic as access to email or VOIP applications such as Skype to enable cheap video and audio contact, or activities more closely related to housing such as paying rent online or reporting faults. It could also be more sophisticated uses such as community blogging, the use of social network sites or building a community website. The key is that an intervention cannot assume a demand but must understand the community's needs/desires, and align the skills agenda accordingly.

Involving the grass roots

The previous point hinted at the need to have a dialogue with the community in order to determine the required content of the intervention. The evidence is even stronger in this regard. In a study of ICT-based community initiatives, Anderson (2006) notes that initiatives that come from the ground-up are likely to be sustained for longer periods than those imposed from the top-down. If an intervention in digital exclusion is to be effective, then it must engage with its potential user base, and if it is to be sustained it must express the desires of this group and derive some of its drive from within the community. So skill development should enable experimentation with the technology, which should in turn make it easy to respond to new demands.

Skills development should not simply impose a curriculum on to a group: it should be a participative activity, to develop competencies in desired ways. Forms of experience- and activity-based learning are more applicable, particularly where a mix of face-to-face and online learning/individuals and technology-facilitated collaboration (eg Wikis, Moodle) is used. An intervention that appreciates the importance of context will involve a dialogue with the users, and is more likely to be sustained - and to a degree, be self-sustaining.

> An effective intervention into digital exclusion should consider both aspects as a coherent whole for the development of an effective strategy.

Technology and face-to-face

In the previous section we emphasised the need go beyond the 'myth of the tech-fix' (Servon, 2002) in the context of intervention into digital exclusion, and stressed the importance of the active participation of the community in the shaping and deployment of interventions. In this vein, it is worth noting that ICT should not be seen as an alternative to face-to-face contact but as an extended opportunity to participate, in the broadest sense, in different ways. It is worth noting that, contrary to the popular image of the solitary computer user, those who are active in the virtual world are also likely to be active in other forms of communication (Anderson, 2006); technology may enhance communication, rather than displacing other forms of interaction. Of course this beneficial outcome depends on the forms and content of the participation, but it does emphasise a link between virtual and face-to-face interaction. This means that interventions in digital exclusion should not be seen as a replacement for face-to-face interaction, but should be integrated with current policy and strategies for engaging with users. Similarly, skills development should retain both online and offline components.

The individual and the community

Interventions in digital exclusion have the potential to be multi-dimensional. Perhaps the most important consideration is the extent to which tackling digital exclusion emphasises either the individual or the community. If the former, it could involve a policy to enhance the skills of individuals so that they can, for example, improve their access to the labour market. This could be seen as the most appropriate response to the Hills report and its emphasis on social mobility and mixed income neighbourhoods. It is an intervention that has a definite aim and prescribed outcomes. Community level intervention, however, lacks this simple clarity of purpose, and refers to wider processes of social inclusion, in both participation in the housing association and in wider civil society. As we have argued, digital exclusion is a complex issue that covers both the individual and the community (and their inter-relations) and interventions into digital exclusion that emphasise either the individual or the community to the detriment of the other are, in this sense, unbalanced. An effective intervention into digital exclusion should consider both aspects as a coherent whole for the development of an effective strategy.

SUMMARY

This section has been more discursive and thought provoking than offering detailed solutions to the issue of digital exclusion. These themes frame the questions that must be asked for a coherent response to digital exclusion but they do not seek to offer panaceas. In contrast, it recognises that interventions occur in different housing associations with differing contexts, perhaps running alongside a history of interventions in other issues.

However there are a number of points that can summarise the discussion:

- digital exclusion cannot be solved simply by providing a PC and broadband, although this is a necessary condition
- skills development is key in addressing the use of ICT
- the application of an intervention should be appropriate and compelling for the needs and requirements of both the individual and the community
- an intervention is more likely to be sustained where it is generated from within the community rather than imposed on it
- virtual interaction does not replace the need for or the practice of face-to-face interaction
- interventions should represent a balanced focus between individuals and the community

SECTION 4

Cases

The previous section identified the key elements that should be borne in mind when developing an effective strategy to combat digital exclusion. The sheer number of factors that exist is due to the complexity of the issue of digital exclusion itself; the supposed magic bullet of providing universal access to computers and broadband is likely to be both costly and ineffective. Recognising this complexity means that there is no single or simple answer to the problem of digital exclusion; each housing association operates within a particular social context and what works in one situation may not simply be imported to another without forethought and sensitivity to context. Our aim is to focus the discussion and introduce the salient factors into this somewhat complex realm. Intervention into digital exclusion is a social intervention and responses to this challenge must recognise such an entwining of the social and technological if they are to be effective.

In this section we will provide examples of interesting practices that address at least some of the issues discussed in earlier sections. The focus here will not be on social interventions but on interesting practice from a technological standpoint. These examples are not designed to be exhaustive nor prescriptive but to give a selection of relevant and interesting practice.

Access without the internet: digital services

Much of the previous discussion has focussed on the use of computers with broadband access as the key technology to be deployed in tackling digital exclusion; indeed the concept of the digital divide is often framed in terms of broadband access. While a broad strategic response to the challenge of digital exclusion has to focus on personal computers and the internet, this does not mean excluding other technologies. Although the OxIS report showed that non-users of the internet have lower levels of access to all ICTs, the divide is less pronounced in terms of digital television; 50% of internet users have access to digital television while 42% of non-/ex- users have access. With the UK government's commitment to turn off the analogue signal countrywide by 2012, and the increasingly low cost of digital set-top boxes, digital television has the potential to become the main method of access to television pictures in the UK.

Digital television not only offers access to a broader range of programming at a potentially higher picture quality than analogue TV: it can also be used for a range of interactive services. DigiTV (www.digitv.gov.uk) is a not-for-profit organisation run by Kirklees council, providing citizen-focussed public-sector specific content through digital TV and mobile phones. The site acts as a hub, offering services to set up digital content and showcasing current projects. Those on the digital TV platform include (examples on following page):

- Access to a choice-based letting scheme in Wychavon
- A service that allows people to book appointments at their GP
- 'Jobcentre plus' services, that enable people to search for jobs within their local area
- 'Looking local' content, which enable people to search for a variety of local information, with a focus on local councils

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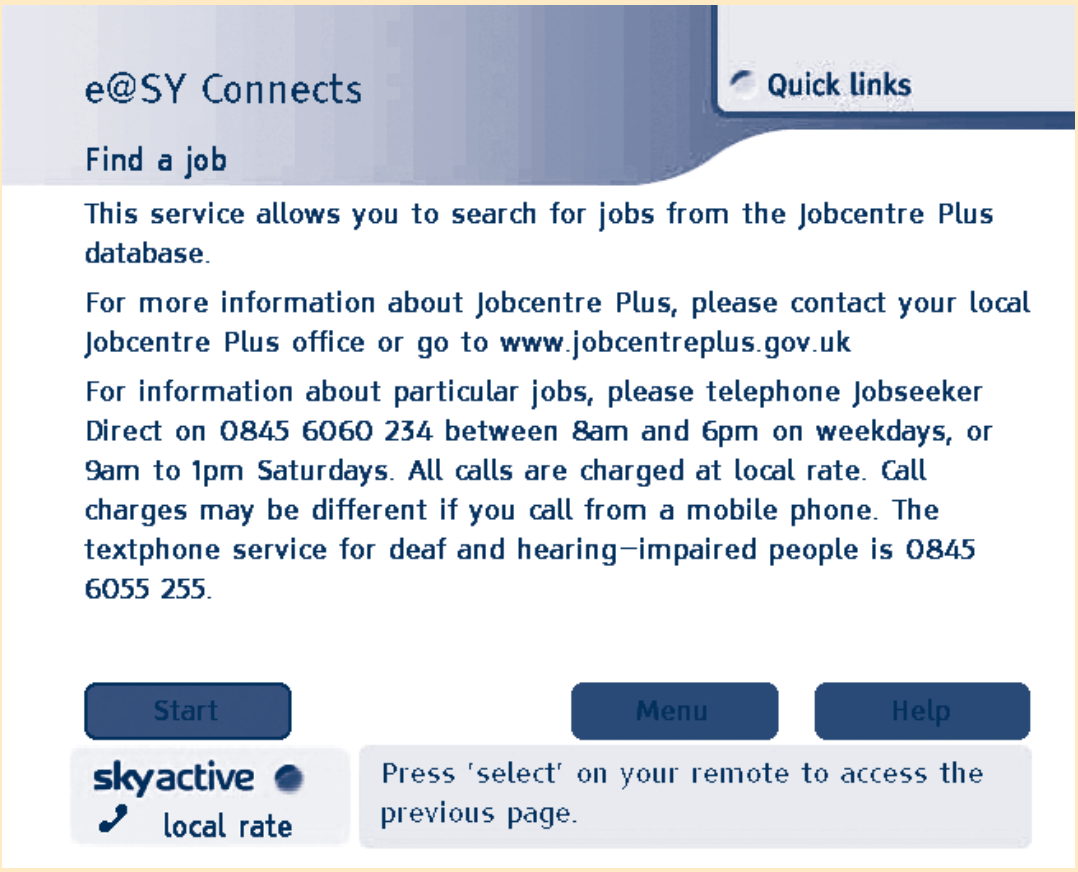
- Access to a choice-based letting scheme in Wychavon.
  (www.digitv.gov.uk/site/content/view/90/65/)

- A service that allows people to book appointments at their GP
  (www.digitv.gov.uk/site/content/view/52/65/)

- 'Jobcentre plus' services, that enable people to search for jobs within their local area (www.digitv.gov.uk/site/content/view/88/65/)



- 'Looking local' content, which enable people to search for a variety of local information, with a focus on local councils (www.digitv.gov.uk/site/content/view/50/65/)

There is a temptation to equate digital exclusion solely as an issue of computers and broadband. Other ICTs have the potential to provide alternative modes of access to electronic services. They are not a replacement for the wide range of activities available in the context of personal computers and the internet, however other ICTs should not be discounted in a broad ranging and integrated approach to digital exclusion.

A preview of some of these services can be seen on their website: (www.digitv.gov.uk/digitv/cds/LookingLocal/Netgem/home). The key advantages of this approach to service delivery are that it is low cost in terms of hardware, has a simplified and familiar mode of interaction (a TV remote control) and requires a low level of skills development for users. However, it has a limited range of interactivity and lacks the potential for user-generated content; this kind of service can also be slow to operate and have limited flexibility. However, it could provide a simplified portal for tenants to carry out certain activities and interactions with their housing association, eg pay bills, report faults, or access information in a low hardware cost/low skill requirement environment. While accessing services in this manner is a base-line position that only brushes up against the issues of digital exclusion, it represents a first step in addressing this broader issue and offers a wide range of people an introduction to electronic access to, for example, their housing association.

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The web for engagement: MySociety

As noted in the previous section, the content of the internet is susceptible to first mover advantage: the substance and culture of the internet has been shaped significantly by the desires and interests of those who came to the technology early. Secondly, as business realises the value of the technology, it becomes saturated with content designed to generate revenue and, ultimately, profit. These two factors could make the internet of limited use to those who come to it late and with limited financial resources, which in turn could reinforce negative attitudes. To counter this, certain sites have attempted to offer an alternative to the pervasiveness of business and/or inanity present in the contemporary internet.

MySociety (www.mysociety.org) is an organisation focussed on developing websites enabling the voice of the community. A brief study of their website shows the variety of projects they work on, of which the following are two examples.

FixMyStreet (www.fixmystreet.com) is an easy-to-use interface that enables people to report (and discuss) issues concerning their local area. The interface allows the user to search their area using a clickable map and see if an issue has been reported. The most innovative element of this website is the reporting function. Users can, for example, submit a report of vandalism or non-functioning streetlights, and the software generates an email template for the user to complete; it then automatically sends this report to the relevant individual/department of the relevant council. Once an issue is dealt with (or not) users can annotate their report, altering its status. This represents a quick and easy way to report problems that removes the need to locate the relevant local authority and department responsible. The ease and utility of this site is impressive, and we recommend you try it for yourselves.

WriteToThem (www.writetothem.com) is a site that enables people to email or fax their representatives (from Councillors to MPs, to MEPs) at no additional cost to the user. It integrates a search function for representatives and enables the user to click a link on their representative's name (or a group of representatives) and send them an email or fax. In general experience, finding out who your representatives are, let alone locating contact details, can be problematic; this system automates the process with ease. For those who wish to exercise their right to contact/challenge their representatives, the site streamlines the process to a few simple keystrokes. Interestingly, usage statistics suggest that people from deprived areas use this site as much as those from higher income areas.

The rationale underpinning MySociety is the notion of an active and informed civic community. These examples act within this ethos and provoke forms of civic engagement. There is clear potential for such ideas to be imported into the social housing context, from a fault reporting service to contacting individuals within a housing association. What is particularly compelling with both FixMyStreet and WriteToThem is their ease of use and the extent to which they present a technologically engineered solution to real issues – while other sites under the umbrella of MySociety may be less impressive, minimally the ethos presents a counter to the prevailing tide of the internet.

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Social networking: Facebook and Housing

Social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Bebo are increasingly drawing media attention, and are often presented as the future of the internet. If any form of site captures the idea of Web 2.0, it is these sites that enable users to generate content and share it among their friends, community and/or other social groupings. Essentially, with minor differences, social networking sites all follow the same model. Each individual has their own web-page which, to a greater or lesser degree, they can customise with content, eg blogs (online diaries), lists of their favourite pastimes, interests, thoughts, videos, pictures, which they can share with other people who are members of the site. Users can choose to share their content only with people they mark as 'friends', or share it with the whole of the site's userbase. Users can join groups of like-minded people, who often have group pages, or choose to create a group for their interest or friends. Social networking sites provide users with the tools and interface to create their own page in a quick and easy manner, add content, engage in discussions, share photos and arrange events etc, etc. Although much of the material is frivolous, some of it has more practical uses. For example, certain courses in the Open University have Facebook pages; these enable people studying the course to discuss its content and identify individuals within their area to act as study partners.

The popularity of particular social networking sites waxes and wanes; at the time of writing, Facebook (www.facebook.com) is attracting the most attention, regularly appearing as one of the world's top ten most popular websites. The ease with which a Facebook page can be set up is impressive and getting involved in networks is straightforward. There are a variety of Facebook groups devoted to the issue of social housing, a small selection of which are:

- **Policy oriented groups concerning the topic of social housing**

  Social Housing UK:
  www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=3487055200

  UK Social Housing Types:
  www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2259192146

- **Tenants association groups**

  Newfoundland And Labrador Housing Tenants Association Members And Residents:
  www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=5311978643

  Family of Friends Tenant Association
  www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=5290312010

- **Housing Association groups**

  Richmond Housing Partnership
  www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=5036502479

- **Housing Exchanges**

  Council / Housing Association
  - Home Exchanges
  www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=4989137324

Looking at these groups, it is clear that the level of activity and number of members pales into insignificance compared with those devoted to celebrities who fill the pages of glossy magazines. However, it is not possible to know the extent of group discussion through the in-built messaging systems. At this point it is worth noting that these are 'open' groups. Facebook allows users to close membership and bar the viewing of a group's site by those not in the group.

Facebook (and other social networking sites) enable users to have a speedy and rewarding experience of the internet; becoming an active participant in generating content and developing communities of interest, armed only with a basic level of skill. Housing associations can set up websites that enable discussion between tenants in particular areas, or generate a forum for all those within social housing. What is most powerful, however, is that within the constraints of the website, users can deploy their own resources and develop their own collective content (sometimes outside the purview of their social landlord). This is an activity that is more likely to be self-sustaining. Admittedly, these worthy Facebook deployments are swamped by less serious content. However, the act of using Facebook and getting involved can function as both display and a catalyst for skills development

10 Websites are susceptible to the ebb and flow of fashion and Facebook is unlikely to sustain its current pre-eminence in the coming years. It would be unwise for housing association to devote excessive resources to a particular site rather than investing energy into the principle of social networking sites; a concept which is expected to be a key element in the current developments of the web.

SUMMARY

In this section we have highlighted three cases of innovative technology use that could be applied in a housing context. The aim is not to offer solutions but to give examples of the range of activities available and to provoke further debate on innovative strategies aimed at combating digital exclusion.

These include:

- using digital television as an alternative low-cost way to provide access to services
- a website designed to enable useful ways for communities to find their voice and access services in an easy-to-use manner
- the potential of social networking sites to create dialogue and content between communities

In this context, a brief look at some of the Federation's members' sites shows that some housing associations are committed to using and deploying ICTs: examples include online rent payment and fault reporting. However, as Pearl (writing in 2002) noted, these interventions have more focus on enabling the practice of housing associations rather than this report's broader focus on digital exclusion - a notable exception is West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative whose integration of a digital agenda into its existing and new housing stock is highlighted in the recent Digital Britain interim report (DCMS/BERR, 2009: 53). Similarly, there are various schemes operating around the UK, such as access to broadband for particular groups (eg EROSH and Digital Unite focussed on delivering broadband to those in sheltered and retired housing, aged 50+). What these practices lack, however, is the broader focus on providing an integrated and subtle intervention that encompasses the consequences and complexity of digital exclusion, as both a technological and social issue.

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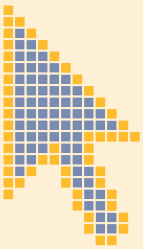

SECTION 5

Conclusion

Digital exclusion is a fact of life for many tenants in social housing. As a group, they are more likely to lack access, skills and confidence in relation to ICTs than most other groups in UK society. In this context, they are liable to experience problems accessing the labour market, find it difficult to interact with a broad range of services, and experience restrictions in terms of their participation in communities and broader civil society. With the increasing entrenchment and use of ICT in more aspects of daily life, these problems are only likely to get worse.

Housing associations have access to part of the population that is digitally excluded and can develop strategic responses to this issue. This kind of intervention is in line with the broader social welfare function of housing associations and presents a timely response to concerns expressed in the recent Hills report. Similarly, reflection on these issues will enable a more nuanced and effective response to the Digital Britain agenda, particularly in the context of its target of universal access to broadband by 2012.

Tackling this issue is not simply a matter of providing hardware and broadband access for all residents. An effective response to digital exclusion includes issues of hardware provision but also takes into account skills development, raising confidence and dispelling diffidence. It should enable tenants, rather than impose an agenda, and give them a compelling reason to participate; it should also see ICT as a complement to face-to-face interaction, not a replacement.

There is a variety of interesting and innovative ICT options, from civic community-orientated websites to user-generated social networking, and it remains a challenge to housing associations to shape their interventions according the needs of their tenants in their particular contexts.

Tackling digital exclusion is not a panacea that will solve issues of social exclusion, social immobility and persistent poverty. However, intervening in this form of exclusion is one key element in tackling these broader exclusions. An effective approach to digital exclusion needs to be appropriate, considered and strategic, otherwise interventions are unlikely to succeed. Inactivity, however, is not an option and will only serve to exacerbate the multiple forms of exclusion faced by too many within the social housing system.

Tackling this issue is not simply a matter of providing hardware and broadband access for all residents. An effective response to digital exclusion includes issues of hardware provision but also takes into account skills development, raising confidence and dispelling diffidence. It should enable tenants, rather than impose an agenda, and give them a compelling reason to participate; it should also see ICT as a complement to face-to-face interaction, not a replacement.

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Digital Exclusion and Social Housing shows that:

- Tackling the issue of digital exclusion is about more than providing hardware, it is also about skills development, raising confidence and dispelling diffidence.
- As a group, social housing tenants are more likely to lack access, skills and confidence in relation to ICTs than most other groups in UK society.
- With the increasing entrenchment and the use of ICT in more aspects of daily life, digital exclusion is only likely to get worse.

iN business for neighbourhoods

The National Housing Federation represents 1,200 not-for-profit, independent housing associations who together provide 2 million homes for around 5 million people in England.

Housing associations have launched **'iN business for neighbourhoods'**, a project to improve performance and challenge negative perceptions of the sector and its customers. They have made fresh commitments to neighbourhoods, customers and excellence. For more information see **www.iNbiz.org**

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